

[By Matt Woolbright](#)

Troop morale remains positive and the only change in Afghanistan for the U.S. military has been a shift from expansion to transitioning out of the country, said Democratic Vermont Rep. Peter Welch after concluding his fourth trip to the Middle East.

"One of the things that's constantly impressed me is the professionalism of the troops and the optimism of the troops, and the get-the-job-done attitude of the troops. That continues unabated since the first trip I made," Welch said Friday.

Welch joined one other House Democrat and four Republicans on the trip led by Republican Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen of New Jersey. The delegation spent time in Oman and Egypt with its main objective — to visit Afghanistan and get an update on the situation there — sandwiched between the two.

The situation in Afghanistan has become a three-legged stool, Welch said, with the first leg being the military.

"The objective is now — this is very much in contrast to when I was there in August — transitioning responsibility to the Afghan national security force, the Afghan army and the Afghan police," Welch said.

That will allow the acceleration of U.S. troop withdrawals — 10,000 by the end of 2011 and 20,000 by September 2012. All of the discussions between the congressional delegation and military leaders on this trip were about transitioning control to Afghan forces, Welch said.

"They have some optimism that this can be done, but also have a view that it has to be done. The Afghans have to step in," Welch said. "It has been 10 years. There's only so much and only so long the American taxpayers and American military should be expected to bear that burden."

Civil institutions and the capability of Afghans to run their own country are the other two legs of the situation in Afghanistan, and they are also both progressing enough to permit the exit of U.S. forces, Welch said.

"Over a year ago, the military was open-ended in the approach. How much more time or troops we might need was an open question," Welch said. "The emphasis is entirely shifted toward a result-oriented bring our troops home and, in order to make that happen, accelerate training of the Afghan security forces and police."

The delegation's stops in Oman and Egypt found positive environments in both Middle Eastern states, Welch said.

A recent report in the Washington Post said the Egyptian military's push for veto power over any legislation relating to itself and other additions to its executive role have angered many Egyptians.

But Welch said embassy officials in Cairo insisted the military remains popular and trusted by the Egyptian people, Welch said.

"However uncertain the future is in Egypt ... the military continues to enjoy significant respect in Egypt," Welch said. "According to the embassy folks, reliable polls said 70 percent of the Egyptian people still have confidence in the military and see it as a unifying institution."

The stop in Oman was to thank the country for its pivotal role in freeing American hikers who had been detained by Iran, Welch said.

The delegation concluded the trip with a stop in London to meet with British intelligence and defense officials about the situation in Afghanistan and to take part in Britain's two minutes of silence that honor British troops who have fallen in combat — a tradition dating to when the guns fell silent on the Western Front in 1918 following World War I.

After President Barack Obama's summer announcement that troops were being pulled out of Afghanistan, and that another military front was to become quiet, Welch said American goals in the country had been accomplished.

"The United States went into Afghanistan for two reasons: to bring Osama bin Laden to justice and to degrade and disrupt al Qaeda," Welch said. "Bin Laden is dead and there are now fewer than 100 al Qaeda in Afghanistan."

The sooner the U.S. ends its involvement in Afghanistan, the better, Welch said Friday.